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Voice for the Silenced

Tracy Arámbula Ballysingh, Ph.D.

Anyone whose path directs them toward a life dedicated to higher education has a story to tell. Mine began with a seemingly ordinary trip to the mailbox of my childhood home; an occurrence so significant that it will forever be branded in my memory. The spring of 1992—it was a humid and lush day in southern Illinois. I walked, trapeze-like, down the rotting railroad ties that traced a line to our rusted and leaning mailbox. Inside, I discovered an over-sized white envelope bearing a distinctive cobalt blue title: “The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.” In whimsically varied font sizes, the following promise danced across the thick admissions packet: “*You will never be the same.*”

That promise would prove to be acutely prophetic. Attending college at the University of Illinois remains the single most transformative experience of my life. The confluence of multiple factors during that time made for a rich experience in terms of my psychosocial development and cultivation of critical consciousness (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Freire, 1974). The paths I selected, the experiences to which I was subjected, the people with whom I crossed paths, the courses in which I enrolled, and the intellectually stimulating environment of the university were all factors that contributed to my personal development, academic resilience, and life opportunities.

My mother’s brief and interrupted college experience was equally transformative for different reasons that yielded completely different outcomes. In fact, contrasts between our experiences in higher education abound.

In college, I struggled to overcome the wounds of child abuse and inadequate pre-college academic preparation due to racially motivated tracking. My mother

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survived social unrest, government oppression, and student massacre. I completed college and advanced to graduate education; she withdrew prior to completion, fled her country, and never returned to higher education.

I did not discover that my mother survived the Tlatelolco Massacre¹ until I was thirty years old. My father revealed her secret during a rare political discussion he and I held following the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Only upon questioning did my mother engage in an open dialogue regarding those events. During a visit in 2008, we sat down together to discuss her experience as a student at the largest university in Latin America, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) at a turbulent time in world history—the late 1960's.

UNAM boasts a long-standing history of political activism, but the global nature of the 1968 student movement, coupled with the spectacle of Mexico as the first Latin American country to host the Olympic Games, provided a stage for Mexican youth to demand major cultural change (Boren, 2001). They did this in defiance of the ruling autocracy, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)². Like many of her peers, my mother was drawn to the activism by the notion that the people of Mexico could alter the course of the country for the better.

The UNAM campus and its affiliated preparatory schools³ were originally designed to serve 20,000 students. By 1968, the population had swelled to 66,000 undergraduates and 22,000 preparatory students (Wise, 1969). Due to the overcrowding, tensions ran high. In July, when two students from rival preparatory schools engaged in an altercation, the police intervened and the students claimed that excessive force was used (Wise, 1969). That summer, conflict escalated and initiated a wave of protests that grew in both ideology and scope.

By August, the movement reached a climax when 500,000 people gathered at the Zocalo⁴ to protest the authoritarian government of President Díaz Ordaz. Chanting at the footsteps of the National Palace⁵, the movement hinted of revolution. Threatened by the palpable energy and sheer volume of the populist mass, President Ordaz used his State of the Union Address on September 1st, 1968 to issue a stern warning: continued tolerance of mass demonstrations would be short-lived. My mother was at the Zocalo that day, and when she described the experience, it was with excitement and pride for a glorious moment in Mexico's history.

Just one month later, on October 2, 1968, the students called another demonstration at Tlatelolco Plaza⁶. The leaders had issued their demands and were set to disperse the peaceful demonstration when federal troops appeared with army tanks (Montgomery, 1968). Recent historical documents have emerged which prove that President Ordaz's elite guard intentionally issued sniper fire on its own army,

leading the army to believe the students fired first (Johnson, 2008; Wilkinson & Bonello, 2008). Chaos erupted, and shooting persisted for hours. Bullet holes and tanks were all that could be seen the next day, because the blood had been washed away overnight. The official government report declared that 28 were dead, but eyewitnesses report seeing hundreds of bodies piled into garbage trucks and driven away throughout the night (Montgomery, 1968; Poniatowska, 1975). When I told my mother the world media called the event a “gun battle” between students and the army (Ginigers, 1968, p. 14), she responded indignantly: “*I never saw anybody with guns! Everybody was just talking. It was just talking!*”

While students worldwide participated in unprecedented levels of activism, Mexico’s students suffered a large-scale violent intervention, premeditated by the highest level of government (Wilkinson & Bonello, 2008). Media censorship and government scare tactics following the massacre left survivors uninformed and paralyzed by fear (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008).

My mother recalled the events of that afternoon only in portions. She had been inspired by the demonstration at the Zocalo and was curious about the movement. Because she arrived late, she was just beginning to walk toward the Tlatelolco Plaza when the initial shots rang out. In a strained voice that revealed her deeply buried pain, she recounted the events of that night for me: “I could hear the shots and the screaming, and people were just running. I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know the movement was that *strong*. You didn’t hear it in the news. You didn’t hear *nothing!*”

The portion my mother recalls most clearly was the manner in which she survived. Instead of succumbing to the flight response, she decided to take refuge in an unlocked truck:

“People were just running. Getting away. I don’t remember why I got in the truck. It’s possible it was a danger that I perceived to be close, to, to hide. I remember people going by the truck and screaming—and the, the shooting. It was real heavy at first. I don’t know how long I was in there. And after that, it stopped. I didn’t move for a *long* time. And there were other people in there because I hid not on the seat, but you know, in the hollow part between the seat and where you put your feet. And there were other people lying on the seats, trying to stay low.”

When I asked my mother if she remembered how she got home that night, she replied: “No. That is *completely* blank.”

My mother’s experience at Tlatelolco was so traumatic and the healing so

incomplete, it derailed her pursuit of higher education, altered her consciousness, and redirected her life course. As a witness to the violence, she and many others in Mexico succumbed to a culture of silence (Freire, August 1970; Morrow & Torres, 2002). The government's methods to contain the movement dehumanized her beyond the threshold where authentic education can occur. By 1969, when she met my father during a short trip to the United States, she was ready to forfeit the years she invested in her education for liberation from the oppressive Mexican state.

The 1968 Olympic Games occurred ten days after Tlatelolco as if nothing had happened. When I asked my mother about her school memories or of the historical significance of hosting the Olympic Games in her home city, she could only respond by saying that she imagined she participated, but she could not recall with certainty. When I consulted a news article from that era, it reported that the campus was deserted: "There were few students to be seen. Those who would comment said that plainclothes secret policemen had entered the campus, looking for strike leaders. The strike has kept 150,000 high school and university students away from classes since the beginning of August" (Montgomery, 1968, p. 1). My mother had nothing to say about the joy of hosting the Olympic Games, but she corroborated the news article's report of silence:

"People didn't talk about who was there or *anything*! I remember some people talking in secret, saying a lot of people were dead. But if they see a professor or someone coming, they would just hush. Because you never knew who was going be part of the other, the enemy, you know? But I remember people saying if you didn't see somebody in school, that you took a class with, well, he was killed, or so scared he didn't come back, things like that."

Regarding the trauma associated with the aftermath, she disclosed: "Later on in the streets, for weeks, there were tanks everywhere. And for months after that, you would see soldiers everywhere. One day, waiting for the bus, I saw a soldier close by with his machine gun, and I felt like—just *vomiting*. I felt like he could read my mind—to know I was there." Her voice shook with emotion, so I changed the subject: "Mom, what do you remember about the university?" She replied: "It was a *beautiful* place. Trees everywhere, going from class to class." That is all she remembers. But when I asked if she remembered her first trip to the U.S., she quickly replied: "Oh, yes! It was a Monday," and she vividly recounted her journey toward American citizenship through marriage to my father, including with who, what, and where she ate after being sworn in as a citizen.

My story begins with a glimpse back to a time when a girl known as Tracy Lee

Turner lived in a small, homogenously white southern Illinois farming town, east of East St. Louis. My mother was a loving, self-sacrificing, fun, and exceedingly hard-working parent. With no college degree, she provided for my brother and I by selling tamales for one-dollar per piece out of the trunk of her car. My father, a native of the town where I grew up and a high school drop-out, was a physically disabled and unemployed jack of all trades whose primary contribution to the family dynamic was oppression, abuse, and control.

By the early fall of my senior year in high school, when my friends began to submit college applications, neither my guidance counselor nor my parents had ever mentioned the word ‘college’ to me. Fortuitously, my close friend, Alan, invited me to join his family on a campus visit to the University of Illinois. My happenstance decision to tag along opened the door to the single most important opportunity of my life—the great equalizer of higher education (Cremin, 1957).

The irony behind this story is that my friend’s penchant for inclusivity eventually led to the demise of our friendship and sparked within me a hunger for social justice through education. Alan⁷, a white man with an AP-decorated academic record, was denied admission while I, a Latina woman with a modest college-preparatory academic record, was granted admission. One frosty spring morning, as we waited outside for the first hour bell to ring, Alan failed to contain the bitterness inside him. With an audience of our friends as witnesses, a racist proclamation slipped from his lips: “*You only got in ‘cause you’re Mexican.*” Humiliation swept over me. Shock, hurt, and dismay rippled through my body. The impact took my breath away. Just as my mother had been paralyzed by fear to the point of nearly vomiting, I was paralyzed by hurt and shame.

Once I reached campus, the disparities that existed between me and my classmates became glaringly obvious. I struggled with academics, and I found that my identity was more closely tied to academic rigor and success than it had ever been before (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). I compared myself to my friends, who came from the biggest and best high schools of Chicago’s affluent suburbs. They owned computers and didn’t need to hold down a work-study job to survive. I determined I was grossly inadequate.

I floundered the first semester due to poor study habits. I relied heavily on caffeine to conquer several all-night work sessions when proper time management could have easily prevented this. The notion that Alan had been right began to fester within me, and my sense of justice begged for an answer. Feelings of inadequacy exposed themselves in the outward form of anorexia nervosa, a reaction to my fear of academic failure and financial delinquency. I found comfort and validation in my anorexia, because I was completely in control of at least one aspect of my life. By my second semester, I had withered to an emaciated 104 pounds from a

strong and fit 145. In addition, my lack of occupational purpose contributed to my identity crisis as I compared myself to my new collegiate peers, who had developed clear and highly esteemed goals long before university. I was an undeclared major who had no idea what the future held for me beyond college. I didn't know what my interests or my strengths were, nor did I know how I might make a career out of them.

Despite all of this, I was thrilled to be at college and felt it was my best opportunity to find fulfillment and success in life. Failure was not an option. I earned straight A's my second semester and made the Dean's List. Jaime Escalante's notion of "ganas"⁸ propelled me toward a complete metamorphosis (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Meek, 1989). In the following years, I developed a balanced sense of autonomy, recovered from my eating disorder, cultivated good study habits and time management skills, and found my sense of purpose. Following a series of meaningful experiences working with children, I discovered education as a promising career path.

For many college students, attending university is mostly about earning a credential that will lead to a well-paid job. For me, college was the gateway to a life of transformation and a means to disrupt the cycle of violence that began with my mother's college experience. Because of the developmental opportunities I was afforded at Illinois, I developed confidence in my intellectual prowess and I excelled beyond undergraduate studies. More importantly, I cultivated a strong sense of purpose and duty to others like me. I chose education as my career path because I wanted to serve as a positive role-model for students with marginalized identities. I finally began to see Alan's accusation for what it was—bitter condemnation by a privileged white man who felt victimized by affirmative action. Back in 1992, I did not possess the knowledge of history, the language, or the critical consciousness to offer him rebuttal. I was simply silenced.

The learning environment at Illinois fostered critical pedagogy. I thusly learned how to challenge the status quo and to formulate my own opinions regarding race, culture, politics, religion, and personal relationships. This is relevant to the academic success of students with marginalized identities because the manner in which I excelled and developed confidence in my intellectual prowess placed me on a path of success and instilled in me a sense of duty to others. My educational narrative beginning at the University of Illinois is one of success, but a significant level of equity and access in American higher education has yet to be achieved for many low-income, first-generation, and students of color. While I am living proof that American universities can indeed be "engines of opportunity," they remain largely "bastions of privilege" (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005). My personal mission as a scholar of higher education is to disrupt this reality.

Notes

¹On October 2, 1968 at the Plaza of Three Cultures in the Tlatelolco section of Mexico City, the Mexican army and elite presidential guard fired upon thousands of unarmed student demonstrators following months of social unrest. The event occurred ten days before the 1968 Summer Olympics and though the precise death toll remains unknown, most sources estimate between 200 and 300 deaths.

²The major rival to the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the PRI ruled Mexico for more than 70 years.

³The UNAM system is comprised of multiple affiliated preparatory high schools. Education in Mexico is compulsory and free only through sixth grade. Thus, only a small percentage is admitted to the preparatory schools. Satisfactory completion of preparatory work leads to automatic admission to UNAM.

⁴A zocalo is a main plaza or square. The Zocalo in Mexico City is one of the largest plazas in the world and is bordered by federal buildings, the National Palace, and the Metropolitan Cathedral.

⁵The National Palace is the seat of the federal executive of Mexico and has hosted the ruling class since the Aztec empire.

⁶Also known as the Plaza of Three Cultures, the plaza is named after the ancient Aztec city of Tlatelolco. It represents Mexico's unique cultural heritage and contains Aztec ruins, the colonial Cathedral of Santiago, and (formerly) the Department of Foreign Affairs.

⁷A pseudonym is used to protect anonymity.

⁸Jaime Escalante is a world-renowned mathematics teacher and the inspiration for the movie *Stand and Deliver*. His notion of “*ganas*” refers to an inexplicable desire to achieve one's goals.

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